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ABSTRACT

The Wheelock College (MA) Family Child Care Project conducted 23 focus discussions of parents' child care experiences. Participants were groups of 8 to 12 parents in 9 U.S. cities. These groups were equal in their use of family child care (either in the provider's home, or in child care centers and preschools). This document presents a thematic analysis of the videotapes resulting from the project. Part 1 of the document analyzes the parents' child care concerns, values, and attitudes. Part 2 analyzes what parents look for in child care. Part 3 interprets the meaning of the findings and their implications. Part 4 presents the caregivers' perspective and their relationship with the parents. Part 5 looks at the separate worlds of mothers and caregivers, the resulting interference in this partnership, and the cultural barriers that prevent the reform of the existing child care system. Among the findings are: arranging for child care is the mother's job; choosing and using a child care arrangement for the first time is very difficult; parents and caregivers live in two different worlds, which may prevent them from working together in the best interest of the child; and there is a need for parent education and consumer awareness around child care issues. (AS)

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Parents Speak About Child Care

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Parents Speak About Child Care

Stressed-Out Mothers, Invisible Fathers, and Short-Changed Children

by Kathy Modigliani

Wheelock College
Family Child Care Project

[Cover photograph by Ron Garrison
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This study explores the findings that emerged from focus groups of parents talking about their child care experiences. The original project was funded by the Dayton Hudson Foundation, Mervyn's, Target Stores, Dayton's, Hudson's and Marshall Fields to inform their national consumer-education campaign, Child Care Aware. *Thanks to Ethel Klein and EDK Associates for conducting the focus groups, producing the videotapes, and making them available for this study.*

The publication presents a thematic analysis of the videotapes, which were rich in data to inform theory as well as the practice of resource and referral agency staff members, teachers, providers, other early childhood professionals, and child-care-consumer parents themselves. Following the thematic analysis, it explores the meaning of these findings, putting forward some untested ideas and controversial hypotheses. No attempt was made to cite related research findings.

Readers are urged to respond, formally or informally. I hope to edit a collection of responses that enlighten and extend the dialogue begun here. Please send comments to the address below.

To order, send $10.00 (includes shipping) payable to:
Wheelock College Family Child Care Project
200 The Riverway, Boston, MA 02215

To Julia, Leah, and Margalete,

and Our Grandchildren

5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 1. Parents' Concerns, Values, and Attitudes
- First Experiences in Choosing and Using Care 8
  - Mothers' Ambivalence About Working and Using Child Care 9
  - A Sense of Loss 13
    - Loss of One's Child's Love 13
    - Loss of One's Child's Childhood 13
    - Loss of Control 13
  - Fear 14
  - Parents' Worst Fears 15
    - Snatching 15
    - Molestation 16
  - Contented Parents 17
- Finding Child Care 18
  - Child Care Referrals 19
  - Paying for Child Care 19
  - Getting Used To It 22

Part 2. What Parents Look For in Child Care
- Trust — First and Foremost 24
- Loving Attention 25
- Safety, Health, and Cleanliness 26
  - Safety 26
  - Health and Contagious Disease Control 27
  - Cleanliness 27
- Discipline and Moderate Order 27
- Program Structure, Education, and Activities 28
  - Children's Activities 30
  - TV 31
  - Making Friends, Being Part of a Group, and Diversity 31
- The Relationship Between Parents and Caregivers 32
  - Information and Involvement 33
  - Time Pressure and Stress 33
  - Supportive Partnerships, Sharing in the Caring 34
  - A Sense of Family 34

Licensing, Training, and Experience
Licensing 35
Training 36
Experience 36
Convenience 36
Attitudes About Caregivers' Income and Working Conditions 37

Part 3 Interpretation and Implications
Mothers, Fathers, and Social Class 40
The Child Care Consumer Process 41
Reluctance to Use Referral Agencies (R&Rs) 42
Child Care, Quick and Cheap — A Paradox 42
The Drive to Pay Low Fees 43
Time Pressure 43
Discouragement 44
The Emotional Distress of Becoming a Child Care Consumer 45
Guilt 45
Fear 47
Loss 47
Jealousy and Competition 47
Jeopardized Attachment 48
Denial and Cognitive Dissonance 49
Making the Most of Child Care 50
Getting Used to It 50
Contentment, A Variation on the Theme of Stress 50
The Problem of Poor Quality 51
Where ARE the Fathers? 51

Part 4. The Caregivers' Perspective
The Satisfactions of Working With Young Children 52
Complaints About Parents 53
Taking Advantage 53
At Least They Could Pay Their Respect 54
Mothers Should Stay Home With Their Babies 55
Mother "Bashing" 56
Cultural Bias 56
Low Expectations for Fathers 57
Providers' Accommodations 57
Passive Acceptance and Denigration 57

Lack of Action 59
The Culture of Silence 60
Us and Them 62

Part 5. A Child Care System in Crisis
The Distant Lifeworlds of Mothers and Caregivers 63
Is This a Business Relationship or Are We Friends? 64
Lack of Direct Communication 65
Overcoming Estrangement 66
Fixing Child Care 67
The Need for Parent Education and Consumer Awareness 68
Parents' Lack of Knowledge About Child Development 68
Mothers' Intuitions 69
Everyone's Problem 70

Notes 71

Bibliography 76

Overview

Twenty-three focus discussions of parents using child care were conducted in 1991, in nine cities across the United States. The groups tended to include eight to twelve parents who were nearly equal in their use of family child care — in the provider's home — or child care centers and preschools, reflecting the national pattern of first-time child care consumers. The small percentage of families who arranged child care in their own homes were not included in this study.

The majority of groups were composed of mothers, an intentional reflection of previous findings that mothers are responsible for making the child care arrangements in most families. While the groups were diverse in income and education levels, mothers tended to be similar to each other within groups. Such like-mindedness resulted in remarkably intimate conversations. The fathers groups, fewer in number, were more mixed demographically.

Part 1 of this paper presents a thematic analysis of the parents' child care concerns, values, and attitudes as expressed in the focus groups. Quotes were transcribed from EDK Associates' videotapes. Part 2 explores what parents look for in child care. Part 3 interprets the meaning of these findings and explores their implications. Part 4 considers the perspective of the caregivers and their relationships with parents. Part 5 explores the separate life-worlds of mothers and caregivers, the resulting interference in their important partnership, and cultural barriers that hold back the reform of our inadequate child care system.

Part 1. Parents' Concerns, Values, and Attitudes

Many parents experience difficulty — ranging from mild discomfort to agony — when they begin using child care for the first time. Although this life transition is often quite painful, especially for mothers, it has not been widely acknowledged. Over time, however, parents get used to the idea of leaving their children in the care of others. Following is a summary of the developmental experiences of mothers and a few fathers as child care consumers.

First Experiences in Choosing and Using Care

Across the country, in one focus group video after another, mothers echoed each other's words. Several described the experience of leaving a child in child care for the first time as frightening. One group nodded sympathetically when a mother explained,

> My first child, when he was 18 months, I put him in daycare and it was the most horrifying experience I ever went through. I was crying, because he was crying, and just hanging on.

It is literally a shock for some mothers to go through the process of looking for a place for their children and imagining them in the situations they uncover in their search, or imagine in their minds. One mother summarized her experience:

> I called several places. There was a lot of waiting lists. I searched and searched, I cried and cried. In a lot of them it looked like these little kids were in cages, all in these cribs lined up. I had never been to a daycare. It was just like little cages . . . . I couldn't imagine him being in a schedule like they had, I couldn't imagine him being with a caregiver that had to give their attention to several other babies, several other small children.

Another said,

> There was this one house. . . . Toys all over the place. It seemed dark, it seemed dirty, and there was a dog *licking a baby*. I wouldn't even let the woman hold Jessica. I just said to my husband "I want out of here. I don't want to be here. I want to leave. I'll wait in the car."

Some of the fathers shared similar apprehensions, though seemingly with less distress. One father who was unusually involved in the process described his experience this way:

> Here was the most precious thing I had, and I was going to entrust someone or some organization with her — you check it out. [Several of the other fathers in the group started coughing just then.] I wanted to trust the person, make sure the person was good, that my daughter wouldn't just be there.

But most fathers reported that they left the looking and worrying to their wives, apparently defining these responsibilities as "women's work."

Mothers' Ambivalence About Working and Using Child Care

A mother of a two-year-old, who worked part-time, described the conflict she felt in trying to decide to go back to working full-time:

> I personally do want to work, and I'm a student, and I do want to have a career, but I don't know if I can justify it, thinking "Now it's five days a week and he's going to be raised by somebody else. Is that fair to him? And if I were him and I was two years old, where would I want to be? Home with my mother? Or at a baby-sitter or daycare?" And this worries me for his sake as well as my own because this is time you can never get back. But yet he's going on, and you can't always put your career on hold.

Later in the conversation, this same mother explained that even before her child was born, both sides of her dilemma were clearly defined:

> Certain people said "If I had your opportunity to stay home with my child, I would. Do it, do it! It's the best thing." Then I had other friends who had to work ever since their child's been born that would encourage me: 'You're making too much out of this. Just do it. Half the kids grow up that way. It's not that big of a thing. You're making it a bigger part of the thing than it really is. You're dreading it too much."

Another mother added that after years of using child care, it was still hard to put her daughter in school-age care:

> When my daughter started school this year, one of the things that stuck with me was that when *I* got done with school, I came home and my mother was there. Putting her in latch-key was as hard for me as putting her in her first daycare. Who does she show her papers to?

Mothers around the country reported feeling guilty about their decision to "put" their children in child care, believing that nobody else could really take proper care of their offspring:

> . . . but it's not their kid, so they won't take the same kind of care of him as I would.

> I worry that I'm doing the right thing with my child, by my working.

> I just didn't look forward to having anybody but me watch the baby. Like he needed me.

> I was concerned that he couldn't get the attention a mother could give.

Those who appeared to have lower incomes and education were likely to accept their need to work as a fact of life, although some said that they *could* have chosen to stay home if they had made sacrifices — but they felt the balance of trade-offs favored their working.

Mothers with higher incomes and education often experienced a

genuine dilemma and were more likely to agonize over their choice. Knowing they have a choice, they tended to have more negative feelings than those who were doing what they had to do, to make ends meet for their families.

Middle-class fathers, too, debated their wives' decisions to work — though not their own. In a group of fathers, one mused,

> Our generation is unique because it is the first generation where the mothers work because they want to work, in many cases. They don't want to stay home full time. Most of us grew up where mom was home all the time. I don't think it's necessarily better or worse, it probably depends on the circumstances, but what I grew up with was my mom was always home. I guess I turned out all right. It was great, but maybe the kids learn socialization quicker now, being in daycare, and get exposed to more stimulating things at an earlier age. That can be good or bad too. The downside is they get exposed to some things that we perhaps would like to protect them from longer.

Another father added,

> I remember being in school and I could call home if I got sick and my mom was always there, and that was real comforting. But I think it's good for kids to have happy moms, and a lot of women now wouldn't be happy at home.

One mother reported that her husband felt more guilt than she did about her working, because he felt he was not a good provider since his wife had to work.

Yet, most of the mothers seemed to enjoy their jobs. One explained to the researcher, "We all have the urge to work outside the home for self-satisfaction." In another group, when one said, "I need adults in my life. I need the challenge," heads nodded in agreement.

In one group, mothers seemed uncertain when someone said, "I think all of us probably agree that the ideal situation would be for

everybody to stay at home with their child, to read to it and be the loving person they are." Upon further questioning, most seemed to agree more with a mother who said,

> I think the ideal would be for more employers to have daycare with the job. You know it would be reputable, you could get down if the child was ill. People would not worry. Even though he's with my friend, still I worry. I wish I could peek in, ask how is he doing now.

Overall, mothers and fathers wanted employers to offer mothers more flexible work schedules. Many mothers said they would prefer to work part-time so as to have more time at home with their children. One said, "When I went to part-time, a lot of the guilt went away."

It seemed that most mothers were torn about whether they would choose to work if they did not need their incomes. One said "I really enjoy my work, but goll, I wish I could stay at home." The researcher asked, "How many of you would like to stay at home?" Most raised their hands slowly and hesitantly. One said "Sometimes," and there was a chorus of "Sometimes." Another seemed to speak for the group when she said, "It's hard to choose because you get fulfillment from both." Were most mothers as truly ambivalent as they sounded? These groups did not pursue their mixed feelings in depth. (It should be noted that all the mothers in this study were working and using child care. Mothers who choose to stay home with their young children, whose voices are not included in this study, wrestle with *their* choice and conflicting thoughts as well.[1])

In the end, most of these mothers who were using child care valued the personal challenge and stimulation of their work in addition to the increased standard of living they contributed to their families. They seemed to enjoy the respite from children and

housework, as well as the social life of their workplaces. But many of these same mothers shared the remorse of "leaving them, not seeing them all day. They're spending a majority of their time with someone else at daycare, doing things without me."

A Sense of Loss

Variations on the theme of loss were mentioned by many of the group members. The sense varied somewhat in exactly what was lost.

Loss of One's Child's Love. Some mothers seemed ambivalent about their children's feelings of affection for their caregivers. They wondered if the love their children felt for their caregivers would take away from the children's love for them. Some caregivers allow, or even encourage, children to confuse their role with that of mother. One mother grimaced as she described a disturbing observation: "He was calling her 'mom.'" Everyone in the group groaned. This theme was not pursued by the facilitator, but feelings of jealousy or competition emerged in a few other focus groups of mothers.

Loss of One's Child's Childhood. One mother who felt that her son was being raised by someone else was not alone. Two others spoke directly of a similar sense of loss, their tone of voice wistful but resigned:

> You're giving your child up to someone else.
>
> They're spending a majority of time with someone else, learning things without me.

Loss of Control. Others did not seem to feel that they were giving up their children themselves, but they were pained by losing

control over their children's lives. In one group after another, mothers spoke with remorse about giving up control and influence over their children. Their negative feelings were increased if they felt they were shirking a primary maternal responsibility.

Fear

Lurking behind the fear of loss of control is the fear that something terrible might happen to the child in child care. Here are some examples from the groups:

> I don't *worry* about them while I'm at work, but I don't like not having ultimate control over their lives. I have to trust other people with them, and that's hard. It's very hard.

> I always have the fear that, if I was at work and the person who was caring for my child — would they do the same thing I would do if my child was injured, would they call the appropriate people, would they function properly, stay in their right mind?

> You worry about everything when they're not under your control — falling out a window, AIDS.

> I have no control over what he does there, but he loves her. I have to let that go, I can't worry about what he does during the day because I think the benefit is so good.

> I have no control over what he does. He goes out visiting friends and relatives with these people — he's part of their family too.

> My worries are long-term — what the end results are going to be. The creation of a wholesome person. I'm afraid they will have a long-term influence greater to mine.

In entrusting their children to others, some parents, especially

mothers, feel a loss of immediate control over their children's well-being, sometimes including loss of long-term control of who they will become as people. (In one group mothers agreed about how consoling it was to know friends who had grown up with working mothers, who "came out well.")

Parents' Worst Fears

Behind the singular emphasis that parents place on trust lurk two powerful fears for their children: "snatching," or kidnapping and "molestation," or sexual abuse. When first asked what they worried most about for their youngest children (at any time, not explicitly in child care), diverse groups of parents in one focus group after another used these words to describe their fears. Apparently at least half the parents shared these fears, many of them intensely.[2] Their stories are chilling.

Snatching. When asked the "worst fear" question, often the first person to speak up said something like this:

> Someone snatching them, and never seeing them again. Before I came here, it was on the TV that this woman had a 2-year old and a 2-month-old, and her husband took them from her. I started crying.
>
> I did too, said another mother in the group.

Other terms they used were "abduction" and "a stranger getting them," but most often they said "snatching." One father said, "There's a lot more ready to snatch them — really or figuratively — than there was for us. Maybe that's an illusion." (He shrugged his shoulders.) Are their fears exaggerated? Another father said,

> Growing up, we didn't hear about child kidnapping a lot. My mother worked, a lot of Black families were different, that had mothers as head of

household. I don't ever remember worrying about kidnapping.

When asked, later in the discussion, how they could tell if a child care program is safe, parents frequently mentioned strict policies about who may pick up their children and careful supervision when children are outside, including preventing abduction.

Molestation. While the parents believed that snatching might occur at any place or time, they felt that sexual abuse is particularly likely to occur in child care. One mother wondered out loud:

> Every time I leave my son at the daycare . . . you know you always hear stories in the news about people abusing children. You can't help but wonder if that's going to happen to your own child. I try to teach him things. He's only 2 1/2, but when I give him a bath, I say "Don't let anybody touch your pee-pee." He's so affectionate, which is kind of scary. He'll just come up and give you a hug, so that's kind of scary.

Unfortunately, one of the mother's fear of molestation may not have been enough to protect her child:

> A girlfriend of mine recommended a lady. . . . She told me her husband worked, but he was home during the day. I did not want my daughter to be in an environment in which there was a male present. Maybe in a daycare center, OK. But in a home, no. I found another daycare through another girlfriend, but my daughter had a yeast infection and my girlfriend's daughter initially had it. The caretaker had a son who was having emotional problems in high school and grew attached to my girlfriend's daughter. When I discovered that I pulled my daughter out immediately.

A mother in another group shared her approach: "I hate to say it, but I want no men on the premises." Another, whose child was in a public preschool program only three mornings a week, said, "Child abuse — that's why I stay home with mine." Another said,

"You don't even want to trust *relatives* because there's so much weirdness out there." (It appeared that some of the other mothers in the group shared her sentiment and others seemed startled by it.)

Given the depth and intensity of parents' fears about kidnapping and sexual abuse, it is not surprising that everyone in one group agreed with the mother who said, "I think the number-one thing that happens to a mother or father when they're giving their child up to somebody else for daycare is: 'Should I trust them?' "

Contented Parents

Certainly there are parents who find wonderful child care for their children and are happy with their decisions. In these groups, several mothers relied upon their caregivers for advice about their children, and some shared a true partnership.

Slightly more than half in one group agreed with the facilitator when she asked if they felt like partners with their caregivers. The close-knit aspect of the supportive partnership that is sometimes developed between mothers and caregivers is decidedly positive to both parties.

A few parents regretted the lack of extended family in their lives, and expressed their pleasure in feeling that their child care homes or centers were like extended family: " I wanted an extension of the family. She's like family to us."

At least two parents mentioned being impressed that their providers stayed in touch with their children and families for years — and they were touched by the emotional bonds that the providers and children still felt for each other.

Some parents in this study voiced how pleased they were with

their child care. But the focus group questions themselves, as well as the facilitators, paid more attention to parents' needs and concerns than their satisfactions and joys. There was a feeling, at times in the conversations, that the good parts were taken for granted. On the other hand, most parents felt at least some ambivalence as they delved into their range of feelings, and these findings hold important implications for parents and early childhood professionals.

Finding Child Care

In most of the focus-group families, the mothers were responsible for finding child care, although a few of the fathers visited potential programs with their wives or consulted on the decision.

Mothers varied widely in how carefully they searched for care. A few had made a long list of traits they considered important and visited five or more programs, but most did not know what they were looking for at the beginning. Some, wisely, began looking while they were still pregnant. One of them said "The utopian child care center does not exist and it is hard to settle for less." Another said "I just kept telling myself that if I spent enough time and money, it would be OK."

But many of these mothers signed up the first place they found that could accommodate their schedule. One shrugged her shoulders and said "I didn't shop around. It [the first available, appropriate opening she found] seemed pretty much up to par." Do a lot of parents think all child care is the same? Overall, these same few mothers appeared to be much more concerned than the others about other details of their children's lives.

Child Care Referrals

Most mothers get their information about child care from other mothers. Some used child care referral counselors at a child care resource and referral agency (CCR&R, or R&R), but most preferred personal recommendations. In response to the facilitator's question about the value of R&R counseling, one father said he would not want to pay for referrals because there are lots of free sources of information. A mother reported that the R&R staff member had not been very personal — "a neighbor will tell you more."

> I remember the feeling of calling up the list of licensed daycares, all these names that you know nothing about. There was a woman in the neighborhood, and I remember going and pinning a note on her door. It was a horrible feeling of trying to start out and not knowing where to turn.
>
> R&Rs only know about people who have a lot of turnover. The really good people don't get on their list.

On the other hand, one mother felt that, because her employer sponsored the R&R service, it was "on the up and up."

Many reported getting child care information from reading *Working Mother* and related magazines, at least in doctors' offices — although others complained that they had no time to read magazines. Local parents' papers were particularly popular. Two mentioned watching Dr. Brazelton's television program.

Paying for Child Care

Overall, about two-thirds of the parents in these groups reported that they did not have trouble finding and paying for child care. Most felt that they had sufficient choices. The clear exceptions were those who could not afford to pay market rate.

The child care choices of mothers with lower incomes were clearly restricted by their inability to pay for quality. One said, "The centers I like, I can't afford. The ones I can afford put the kids in front of TV all day." As low-income parents described looking for care, they frequently mentioned that a program was too expensive. The option of going on welfare was a possible alternative for some: "Child care for a hundred dollars a week when you're only making $200, $300 a week — I'd rather stay home." Yet these mothers were more sympathetic to concerns about caregiver incomes than other groups.

Middle-income parents were often keenly cost-conscious in their search for care. When the discussion topic turned to rates and fees, some in each group were likely to be interested in finding out more about caregivers who were reported to charge low rates.

And yet, when asked about their ability to pay, cost was simply not an issue for most middle-income parents. The fathers all seemed to feel that child care was not overly expensive. One lower-income father said "Three dollars an hour is pretty reasonable nowadays." Associations to the term "quality child care" in one group were: "expensive," "expensive and worth it," "lasting," and "worry free." In that group, only one mother agreed that she felt "stretched" by what she was paying for child care. Other comments were:

> I would pay more for what I have now. It's a bargain.
>
> Teen-age baby-sitters cost $3 an hour, so daycare being $70-90 a week isn't really an issue.
>
> I truly believe that good daycare is the difference between me working and not working. So to me, there's not a price to it. I would pay more as long as I was making more than I was paying and I enjoyed what I was doing.

When asked if most parents shop by price, one said "Every place is the same price." But in fact, prices varied greatly. One mother said,

> In the home we're in, I only pay $65 a week. I started with her several years ago and she just didn't feel she could raise her rates that much. I told her a million times she has the lowest rates of anybody I ever talked to.

In the same group, another mother said,

> We pay her 52 weeks a year, $170 a week, soon to be $175, which is a little pricy, but we have great communication.

Many parents thought of cost in terms of the services received. One thought that centers were more expensive than homes because they had better equipment, like swings and fenced yards. A single mother who was a public school teacher said,

> There are daycares out there that want $100-$150 if they're still in diapers. If you have someone coming in your home — you get a nanny and a maid. I'm willing to pay that if they're going to come into my home and really make life easier — get her dressed, feed her breakfast. If I have to go through a lot of the motions to get to you, then I feel that's just over-priced, especially when it's not one-on-one.

The going assumption, in the early childhood field and the wider public, is that parents cannot afford to pay more for child care. But, as shown in *Child Care as an Occupation in a Culture of Indifference*,[3] some parents cannot afford the amount they must pay at this time, and others could afford to pay substantially more than they now pay. At this time, in fact, caregivers subsidize the cost of child care for upper-income parents as well as those who need their subsidy.[4]

Getting Used To It

Despite the anguish felt by many mothers and some fathers who are new to child care, most seem to agree that it became fairly routine over time:

> The second time around it was much easier, because you become used to it.

> I cried with the first one, but for the second one it was nothing like that. Once you get over the initial shock of somebody else watching your child, it's not a big deal.

The mother who had found it "a horrifying experience" to enroll her first child in child care at the age of 18 months changed her approach as well as her attitude and comfort level with her other children:

> The other two went right away. There was no transition from being at home. It took my first child a couple months [to adjust to child care]. The newborns I introduced gradually to the daycare environment, by visiting before hand.

> These two ladies took care of my other children for 10 years. So I just trusted them immediately with my baby.

The mother who said she anticipated feeling guilty about not being at home after school, having her school-age daughter in "latch-key," later told another mother, "I found they're just as excited at five o'clock."

As time passes, parents come to know their caregivers, to feel more comfortable with them and the idea of their children in care. The caregivers are no longer strangers, they may become partners in rearing the child, even friends or like-family.

Yet one of the parents who had had more than ten years of experience using child care summed up her sense of it: "Everybody agonizes over child care." While using child care becomes easier for everyone, for some parents it is never carefree. Others adjust to conditions that they should find intolerable. A mother told about an experience with her daughter: "One time when I picked her up, she was in a crib in a closet, sobbing. I don't know how long she'd been there." Inexplicably, this mother did not mention doing anything to change the arrangement and the group facilitator did not ask further questions. Others, like the mother who was horrified at seeing a dog licking a baby, continued looking until she found satisfactory child care.

Parents become better-informed consumers as they learn — sometimes the hard way — what to look for in child care and how to go about finding it. By the time they gain the experience of several years, all the while developing as parents, they know what they like and how to look for it. Mothers who were relatively new to child care were often interested in the perspectives of these old pros.

PART 2. WHAT PARENTS LOOK FOR IN CHILD CARE

This section explores the various attributes of child care that parents mentioned as being important to them. The attributes are presented in order of emphasis across all the groups.

Parents agreed on the centrality of trust as an absolutely essential component of quality and there was a tendency toward agreement on the other basic caretaking criteria as well. Differences in emphasis came out in discussions about activities and other second-order characteristics.

Trust — First and Foremost

As is evident from these conversations, the number-one attribute that parents look for in child care is trust in the adults who will be responsible for their children. One mother explained why she liked her provider: "My first child was with that caregiver since she was six months old, so there is trust." A father said, "We called a reference. They said they totally trust her — they would give her the key to their house."

Another said, "She's like family. I trust her completely — well, . . ." She grinned sheepishly. The group laughed, apparently familiar with her sentiment. Do parents try to convince themselves that they trust their caregivers even when they are not quite sure?

The word "stranger" was used frequently in these conversations, as in "It was hard to contact a stranger to watch my child." Often, since trustworthiness is hard to assess, parents selected someone they knew — or someone who was known by someone they knew.

One chose "a friend of a friend of my mother-in-law's." Sometimes there seemed to be no reason for their selection beyond such a tenuous connection.

And some stay with a trusted caregiver for years, without reassessing the children's changing needs. A sizable number of mothers appeared to prefer to leave their children in mediocre situations with someone they knew rather than in optimal situations with strangers.

Loving Attention

Most parents looked for caregivers who appeared to like children and know how to get along well with them. They watched how the caregivers related to the children. Did they hold the babies, and look comfortable doing so? Were they friendly and relaxed with the school-agers?

Most parents were sensitive to the amount of attention and the quality of attention their children would receive. When asked to describe "quality child care," one mother appeared to speak for many when she said:

> You feel like the person you found gives your child attention, love and caring, is taking your place — giving your baby what you would give. You feel like you found that. You have to feel that way or you'd be a nervous wreck.
>
> You'd go crazy [added another mother].

The attitude and personality of the caregiver was important to most parents. Many looked for people who were patient and positive. When asked for signs of quality, others mentioned "Lots of attention," "Loving caregiving," "Personal one-on-one time with the child," "Hugs," "Cuddling." For younger children especially,

parents wanted cuddling, holding while giving a bottle, diaper changes when needed. Other signs of loving attention included:

> I'd want to see her down there on the floor with the children.
>
> I want him to be emotionally happy and stable there.
>
> Baby-sitters [spoken with disdain] — they sit, and there's the baby.
>
> If my child wants to tell them something and they just don't have time to listen. . . . I worry that *I'm* not giving them the time they need. I hope *they* are. My daughter is a holy terror.
>
> I was concerned that he couldn't get the attention a mother could give.

Others put less emphasis on attention. One said explicitly, "I want my child to get *some* individual attention sometime during the day . . . " [implying "but not too much"]. However a clear *lack* of individual attention was distressing to all.

Adult-child "ratios" or "not too many children" were mentioned by a couple of parents in most groups, and some saw ratios as an indicator of the amount of one-on-one time a child would get. Others seemed unconcerned about ratios but did assess the general atmosphere of the place. Said one father, "She had quite a few children, but everything was orderly."

Safety, Health, and Cleanliness

Safety. As we have seen, concern for children's physical safety is a critically important feature for parents and is central to the issue of trust. Nearly everyone agreed that caregivers should have training in CPR and First Aid. A few mentioned electrical cords and socket plugs, stair gates and child-proof door latches, although others said

that they took for granted that the caregivers had tended to such details. Occasionally parents who lived in low-income neighborhoods mentioned that they were concerned that a home or center be in a safe neighborhood — middle-income parents seemed to take this feature for granted. Other comments included:

> No pets, or pets that are good with children.
>
> Eyes "in the back of her head."
>
> I was looking for how safe the environment was going to be. The last lady I chose opened up all her cabinets and showed me: "This is where this is kept. This is where the children play. This is where they nap."

Health and Contagious Disease Control. Contagious disease control was the main health issue for parents, though often it became an issue only when frequent illnesses were a problem.

> Every daycare has kids with runny noses, but my son's had pneumonia three times in four months.

Two fathers complained that they frequently got sick with illnesses their children brought home from daycare. Only a couple of mothers mentioned that they wanted their children to be fed nutritious meals.

Cleanliness. Parents generally wanted a center or home that is clean — but some added, "Not too clean." One of the fathers said, "I like to get the feeling that somebody's attempting to keep things relatively clean and neat."

Discipline and Moderate Order

A certain degree of structure was important to all parents, regardless of the age of their children — a sense of orderliness

signaled that things were under control. Part of the provider being "good with kids" meant that they were effective in their management of the children. General messiness or a lack of discipline were red flags for most parents.

Program Structure, Education, and Activities

Although there was a fair amount of consensus about the previous attributes, parents varied widely in the value they assigned to another type of structure — which might best be termed "program structure." Any kind of structure was usually seen as undesirable for babies or toddlers. On the other hand, some parents of older preschoolers wanted fairly structured programs, while others clearly did not. Parents tended to expect family child care to be more informal and less educational than centers, and thus they often preferred family-like settings for infants and toddlers and centers or preschools for older children. Here is a sample of their statements:

> Baby-sitters are OK for newborns. They need motherly instincts.
>
> At 18 months, I didn't want to put him into a structured daycare, so I got a baby-sitter.
>
> I thought she was too young to go to an organized daycare.
>
> I like a home at an early age — I don't like to see a baby in a day care center.
>
> I don't believe in ABCs for the little ones. I'm tired of structure. I feel bad enough that she has to go there. I want her to play. When they're ready, they'll learn.
>
> After our daughter was in a home for 2 1/2 years, the lady was very unstructured and spent a lot of time watching TV, so we moved to a center. The

center is much more reliable.

I was concerned about what she was being taught. The daycare she's at now, they're teaching her how to write, say her ABC's. It's much more advanced. She's still a kid, but she's maturing.

I want some sense of schedule, especially for preschoolers, but not every minute structured.

I was looking for enrichment daycare.

She's learning at school, tying her shoes, the letters. It's not just a daycare where they're watching them do what they want to do.

Structured learning is what I want.

I don't like Eric to be real structured, until he goes to school.

The following discussion occurred among a group of fathers:

When I grew up, we didn't have soccer, all these organized activities that they start now at five years old. We had to be more creative about what we did. You know, we'd get an old sock and a board and play out on an empty lot. Now it's all organized.

Yeah, we jump up at 8:00 on weekends, taking them here and there. It's overkill.

Among these parents there was a tendency for lower-income parents and African-American parents at all income levels to prefer more program structure and firm management of children's behavior. Some of these parents seemed particularly concerned that programs for their children over age 2 1/2 to 3 be structured — "from morning to night" said one mother — focusing on academic learning and discipline. Some apparently more middle- and upper-income caucasianparents tended to be more interested in learning

through play and were concerned that their young children's lives not be overly structured; a few mentioned that they wanted their children to have fun in child care. One upper- or middle-class father said, "I want the center to nurture whatever he's good at."

Parents showed clear differences in their values concerning the relative importance of play versus teacher-centered curriculum. When asked their associations to the term "educational child care," mothers in one group associated the words "teachers," "certified teachers," "informative," "books." Then someone added "too structured."

Children's Activities. To some, the critical ingredient for high-quality preschool care — after the basics of trustworthiness, loving care, and safety — involved the provision of a range of activities. These parents, whether consciously or not, display a working knowledge of what early childhood professionals call "developmentally appropriate practice."[5]

> Education — that's curriculum, a wide range of toys, books, exposure.
>
> I worked in a daycare before so I knew what I was looking for: full of activities and a little bit of exposure to the alphabet.
>
> One day she'd be a frog and she'd have her froggy mask, and the next day — you know.
>
> Special activities, for example exploring a bus, getting to sit behind the wheel.
>
> You can't push them too fast or they'll turn off to skills. It's not skills and facts, but curiosity.
>
> He's very inquisitive. He needed more, maybe, than I was giving him.

We can hear in these parents' words that they feel their

children's child care experiences are positive additions to their lives, not the mere "watching" or "keeping" that other parents seemed to expect. One mother said she had enrolled her daughter in a center because, "At my mother's age she doesn't have the patience to read to her, just enough patience to keep up with her." Another reported "I don't have the energy after work to do activities with them." On the other hand, two others agreed that reading in child care wasn't too important because they read to their children at home.

Parents explicitly disagreed about three activity areas: art activities, manners, and watching TV. One mother, an artist herself, thought that art should be a primary focus for preschoolers. Others in the same group said that they did not agree. Some wanted their children to learn to be polite to adults, to use good table manners, and so on. Others seemed less interested in this aspect of the program.

TV. Concerning TV, some felt that Sesame Street and children's videos were OK, though one said "She gets that at home." One complained that her child had seen a video so many times at the provider's house that he had memorized whole parts of it. One said "Less videos, less Nintendo." Others said "No TV."

Making Friends, Being Part of a Group, and Diversity. Most parents agreed that babies should be held and cuddled, as discussed in the section on Attention and Love. Whether consciously or not, they valued the building of a life-long foundation for their children's relationships.

Some parents were particularly interested in their children learning to get along with others and being part of a group. Examples of what they wanted their young children to learn were: to make friends, sit in a circle and learn to listen, wait their turn,

express themselves, gain the confidence to speak out in a group.

Two mothers mentioned issues pertaining to cultural diversity. One, a Latina, mentioned seeking an ethnically diverse group of children. Another agreed — she was a Caucasian who had adopted a Hispanic child. An African-American mother whose child had had several caregivers said to a group composed entirely of African-American mothers,

> All of these keepers were black women, and I started to become concerned in switching her around, because I knew she needed stability and consistency. I decided it was time to try a different race, so I put her in a home with this Jewish White woman, and that worked out really well. At first I had some concerns because during certain holidays they could only eat Kosher things, so I couldn't bring certain things into her home.

> I thought that if I had something particular, I would want someone to respect my wishes, so I tried to look at it from the other point of view. She worked out very well. She also was married, but her husband wasn't in the home during the day. It was an inter-racial-culture of children. There was one of everything — an Oriental, a Black child, a White child, a Jewish child.

No other form of diversity was mentioned by other parents.

The Relationship Between Parents and Caregivers

When asked for words they associated with the term "mothers and caregivers," the first three speakers in one group summed up the range of feelings among all the parents: "close-knit," "employer," and "stressful." Slightly more than half agreed when the facilitator asked one group if they felt like partners with their caregivers. Central to their assessment of these relationships was the exchange of information about the children.

Information and Involvement. Most mothers wanted brief reports on what happened with their children during the day: what their very young children ate, what their preschoolers did. One wanted a bowel movement report for her baby. Some parents appreciated getting expert advice on such subjects as toilet training and signs of infectious disease. Two parents appreciated being able to read meal and snack menus.

One mother liked being told "We need to work in the following directions, caregiver and parents together" for her child who showed signs of a learning disability. But when the facilitator asked the next few groups if they would want information about their children's learning disabilities, the answer usually resounded, "No."

Parents agreed that being invited to social events like Christmas and birthday parties at the child care setting was good. They liked the chance to meet the other families. But such opportunities were considered "nice but not essential."

On the whole, a majority of parents did not want to be involved in other ways. In fact, most seemed happy to be able to drop off or pick up their children with a minimum of hassle.

Time Pressure and Stress. While mothers may have been quite sensitive to their children's needs, they were limited in the amount of time and energy they had to give to meeting these needs, especially among those who worked full-time. When asked what they do in their leisure, about half reported that they simply have no leisure time. Frequently the issue of mothers' time pressures were mentioned during the introductions at the beginning of the group. For example,

> I have two children, I work full-time, and other than that I don't do anything.

[Group laughter.] Being here — this is a break!

Another mother explained,

> You never have down time. You never have time to buy a pair of shoes. On the weekends you drag them from store to store to store. You don't get time to play with them. By the time my daughter goes to bed at 9:30, I'm ready for bed.

In one group, six out of eight mothers agreed that they felt "stretched to the limit" in their lives. This appears to be the cause of their lack of interest in daycare committee meetings or phone conversations with their children's caregivers. One mother said, "My daughter's last center wanted you to stay after work and watch your kid. When you're working you don't have time for that."

Supportive Partnerships, Sharing in the Caring. But some mothers felt differently. A few wanted intimate involvement with their children's providers. In the following example a mother expressed her gratitude for the meaningful partnership she had with her provider:

> We have great communication. Like, my darling little girl had a temper tantrum last week, and [the caregiver] told me exactly what she did. Then she said, 'Are you OK with that?' And I said, 'Yep, that's exactly how I would have handled it.' We can communicate like that. . . . In addition to paying her $175 a week, we also have to pay about $100 a month for backup care when she has a day off or our daughter is sick. But it is worth it.

Fathers did not talk about their relationships with caregivers or involvement with the program, except for one who had obviously spent pleasant time at his daughter's center.

A Sense of Family. A few parents felt that their child care and the other families in their programs were like extended family, and others would probably have agreed with this sentiment if they had

been asked. Unfortunately, this topic was not addressed by most of the groups, so we do not know whether these parents searched for such a program or were simply lucky.

Licensing, Training, and Experience

While licensing and training are usually seen by early childhood professionals as indicators of good quality child care, parents seldom felt strongly about either one. On the other hand, experience is valued by parents, while researchers have not usually found experience to be correlated with quality. This relationship may be confounded by a tendency for the newer providers to offer higher quality care, at least according to the researchers' criteria. Interestingly, providers and teachers, as well as parents, usually believe that quality improves with experience.

Licensing. Parents did not know what state licensing entailed, although some perceived it as an indicator of responsibility on the provider's part. Opinions differed about its value:

> I've seen licensed homes that were all over the place. They only inspect you once a year.

> I would leave my child with an unlicensed person if I knew them, but not if I didn't.

> There are two basic reasons for licensing: so you can get their tax ID number and so they have a background check and fingerprinting.

> There was a time before licensing when someone could take care of 100 kids and not feed them.

> Licensing shows character. You know that this person cares about the law to do what she should be doing. They'll feel a little more responsible.

Training. When asked for their associations to the term "untrained child care," parents most often mentioned terms like "chaos," "out of control," and "lack of supervision." (A high number of young mothers immediately associated the term "training" with "potty.") Some parents believed that training would help caregivers learn how to manage a group of children effectively and avoid "kids running wild." But others agreed with the sentiment, "People have grown up for centuries without all the latest theory on discipline."

Mothers in more than one group observed that a single training course could not possibly cover all the relevant information a provider might learn. Some reasoned that they had not received training as parents, so their hired surrogates did not need it. One mother speculated with a twinkle in her eye, "Someone who is untrained might be an advantage — they might be willing to do things the way you want them done."

Experience. Experience was seen as more important than training by most parents, especially for younger children. They felt that most relevant knowledge — whether or not some behavior was normal at a certain age, for example, or whether signs of illness were serious or not — could be gained only through experience. Many would agree with the mother who said, "If someone had a Master's degree but didn't have any children, I'd rather they had children, though they need to be able to read and write."

Convenience

Occasionally parents mentioned convenience factors:

Being open every day with consistent teachers.

Close to home.

Close to work.

Open early, close late [group laughter].

Parents with non-traditional work schedules mentioned the need for part-time, irregular, and evening care and sometimes had to use a variety of arrangements to fill in.

Attitudes About Caregivers' Income and Working Conditions

Parents' attitudes about the work of caring for children, the people who do this work, and their incomes revealed concern and possibly guilt:

> If you think about it, the people who are taking care of your children aren't getting paid good. You think about how your performance is affected by how much you're paid. Those people who are taking care of children also need to get paid to make a living. They're working hard, cause I know it's hard to take care of my child.

Most groups did not address the caregivers' incomes and working conditions. But in one discussion, two parents commented on the subject:

> At our daycare center they sent out a questionnaire asking what you like and don't like about it, and one of the questions was "Would you be willing to pay more, so we can pay the people more?" I would.

> The last time my caregiver raised her rates, she lost two families. It would be nice if you could subsidize the day care person so she could make the money she needed and the families could keep working, [rather than quit because they can't afford daycare]. But I'm not sure who's going to pay for it.

There followed a debate about whether child care should be supported by tax dollars, like public schools. All but one agreed. The facilitator asked parents what help government might give

child care. "You could raise the wage rate, pay the child care providers more money, so you could get higher-quality people and they would stay around longer," said one mother. Others nodded.

The following suggestions were offered by experienced parents to those who were new to looking for child care:

> You should see how they treat the employees. Do they give sick days and vacation?
>
> You should ask "How many adults will be in here in a day? And how long has each one been here?"

The facilitator asked, "Why is the turnover rate so high?" Mothers in one group, all of whom had professional jobs, answered one after the other:

> It's not an easy job. It's not glamorous. It's not high pay.
>
> The hours aren't good. [All shaking their heads back and forth, smiling, "no."]
>
> And all the parents are so demanding. [Several had begun to laugh at each additional descriptor, even as they shook their heads.]
>
> Stomach flu going through the infant room. . .
>
> Dirty diapers. [General laughter.]
>
> My sister's a college-graduate preschool teacher and she's been doing it for a lot longer than I've been at my job, and she makes nowhere near what I make, and she works much longer hours and she has to go back on the weekends and put up bulletin boards. There's no incentive unless you get some payback out of the kids, which she does. There's no money in it. [The group became silent.]

At least in this group, mothers seemed to understand that they were dependent on the caregivers performing a job that they would

not enjoy, for wages that they would not work for. How is this reconciled with the additional understanding that they are underpaying the caregivers?

In trying to answer the facilitator's question about why turnover is the worst among toddler teachers, one mother asked, "How many two-year-olds could *you* take?" The others built upon and extended her theme:

> They've got their college degree and they can't teach these kids anything.
>
> Trying to potty train a dozen kids at the same time.
>
> Biting.
>
> Nightmare from hell!
>
> We're expecting a lot more from our daycare providers than we expect from ourselves. I don't know how often I'd get out paint, glitter.
>
> We should raise the wages, pay a higher wage rate for them, so we get higher quality people who stay around longer. [No one disagreed with her.]

When the facilitator asked how many thought they would get better day care if they paid more money, several spoke up that they would pay more money *now* if they had the choice of better care. According to these conversations, cost is not a major issue for middle-class parents. This finding contradicts the going assumptions of early childhood professionals and policy makers, although several other studies have reached the same conclusion.[6]

And yet, though they said they would pay more, only a couple of parents mentioned taking any initiative to do so. It seemed that middle-income parents who were basically happy with their child care might have paid more if they had been asked, but they were seldom asked. Perhaps they should be asked. It can be argued that it would be in their best interest to do so.[7]

This concludes the presentation of information from the focus groups. The next part analyzes and interprets these findings.

PART 3. INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

The focus group conversations suggest that the experience of choosing and using child care for the first time is extremely difficult for many parents. Powerful emotions may be stirred up as they, especially the mothers, leave their children with strangers in unfamiliar settings, for what they may believe to be the better part of the children's waking hours.

Mothers, Fathers, and Social Class

Men in the fathers' groups were not usually as concerned as the mothers were.[8] In fact, most fathers appeared to be quite happy leaving the child care arrangements to their wives much as the wives might leave car repair to their husbands. Mothers in this country are assigned the primary responsibility for the care of their children, so arranging for alternate child care is defined as the mother's job.[9]

Mothers who perceive that they are purchasing a surrogate for themselves may feel that they are failing in a basic maternal responsibility by abandoning their young children. Such conflicts are particularly likely to be experienced by women whose husbands earn a "comfortable" income — and those whose mothers were

"always at home for" them. Those who do not *need* to work are prone to worry about their choice. At the same time many of these women want to work outside the home, for their family's sake as well as their own. Fathers in middle-class families are more likely to question their wives' choices as well.

Mothers who grew up with a working mother are more likely to feel that having others care for their children while *they* earn a living is the normal thing to do. Lower-income mothers in these groups did not usually agonize over their child care decisions, though many were wistful about their lack of time with their children. But, at least in one group, poor mothers also felt that they *could* choose to stay home with their children *if* they really wanted to, but that it would not be worth the sacrifice. (New restrictions on AFDC after welfare reform will probably limit this form of parent choice, although the unavailability of satisfactory, affordable child care may qualify mothers of very young children for waivers from work requirements.)

Eventually, however, most parents not only "get used to it," but go on to feeling fairly satisfied with their child care. And yet, these focus groups suggest that the overall experience of a significant number of child care consumers is not particularly positive.

This section reviews the focus group findings pertaining to the process of choosing child care and the consequences within the cultural context that determines the present conditions.

The Child Care Consumer Process

The focus group facilitators asked parents about their selection process and specifically if they had used a child care resource and referral agency.

Reluctance to Use Referral Agencies (R&Rs). As we have seen, when parents in this study looked for child care, they usually sought word-of-mouth recommendations from friends or relatives as their main source of information. They seemed to believe that they could trust caregivers they found through personal contact, perhaps because these caregivers had passed someone's test of time and were likely to share their values. Since parents are worried about leaving their children with strangers, they are likely to feel dissatisfied with referrals from an agency that do not carry any promise of trustworthiness. Several parents in this study were aware of their local resource and referral agencies, but did not call them for information because they understood that the agencies gave referrals to anybody who was licensed, and "anybody can get a license."

Child Care, Quick and Cheap — A Paradox. Most of these mothers did not spend a good deal of time searching around for the best child care they could find. Instead, they usually seemed satisfied to enroll their children in the first available program they found that had been recommended by someone they knew. It was unusual for parents to visit more than one or two programs. There appeared to be little effort to find out what their children's daily experiences in these programs would be like — and indeed, even if their children had been enrolled for some time, they usually seemed unaware of the nature of the child's experience.

The distress that most mothers and a few fathers feel about hiring someone else to take care of their children stands in apparent contradiction to their behavior in choosing and using child care. R&R counselors confirm the finding that parents frequently settle on the first program they find that is acceptable. Child care directors and providers confirm that many parents do not want to visit a program before enrolling a child. Why do most parents spend little

time making their decision?

The Drive to Pay Low Fees. Keeping cost low is a primary consideration of most parents in choosing care. As we saw in the previous section, this is a very real problem for low-income parents, who find their child care options severely limited by their inability to pay for quality. But concern about cost among middle- and upper-income parents did not seem to be related to ability to pay. Rather they were looking for a bargain. Some parents who were savvy consumers of other up-scale products and services seemed unaware of anything but the most superficial differences among programs. Why do parents who can afford to pay more look for child care on the cheap? What does this reveal about their values? Do other consumer desires win out over the quality of their children's daily experience? What else is going on here?

A final implication of these findings is that middle- and upper-income parents are hiring caregivers at wages considerably lower than they seem to think they deserve to be paid, without health insurance or retirement benefits, but accept this as the cultural norm. Child care becomes another commodity of the marketplace. And such a deal.

Time Pressure. A nearly universal finding about full-time working mothers, affirmed by the focus groups, is that they are severely pressed for time. It is as if their lives are "built around a ticking stopwatch."[10] One factor in their lack of shopping around like a good consumer is that they lack the time. Depending on their work schedules, they may also have to take time off from work to visit child care programs. Most employers do not encourage workers to take time off to deal with child care problems.

Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift*[11] documents the long hours most mothers still spend on the traditional homemaker's duties,

now on top of full-time jobs outside the home. These mothers have little time to themselves. Do working mothers put up with this inequity because they feel guilty about abandoning their families by going to work? Does assuming the burden of all the housework and child care serve as penitence for their transgression?

Margaret Nelson (1990), in her insightful study of Vermont mothers and family child care providers, *Negotiated Care*,[12] summarized the continuing consequence of some mothers' time pressure on their relations with caregivers:

> Some women simply do not feel they have the time to be concerned about anyone else; they find the requirement of showing gratitude or friendship a heavy burden they do not want to assume." (p. 66)

While these mothers may prefer to keep financial arrangements informal, Nelson observed, they want their personal relationships with the caregivers to be tidy and business-like. (Caregivers are likely to want the personal relationships to be informal and the financial arrangements to be business-like.)

Discouragement. Another reason why parents don't shop around is that even when they look hard, they sometimes cannot find high-quality child care — sometimes it simply isn't affordable or available. The grapevine in most communities asserts that openings are hard to find, especially for infants and toddlers (often rightly so). Good child care homes and centers usually have waiting lists, and long ones when the economy is strong. Parents may feel discouraged and perhaps somewhat desperate before they even begin looking for child care.

Many parents also seem to feel inadequate to interpret the differences among child care programs. The theme, "I don't know

what to look for" is especially common among first-time child care users. Parents seem to feel incapable of making good decisions about the care of their own children.

The Emotional Distress of Becoming a Child Care Consumer

Though they may not want to admit it, even to themselves, many mothers struggle with an inner voice that whispers that maybe they should stay home with their children . . . that their children may not be OK in child care. The culture they grew up in contributed powerful messages, shaped in turn by their personal experiences.

Guilt. According to dominant U.S. cultural values, mothers are essentially responsible for their children and "how they turn out." (See the references for additional readings on the cultural construction of motherhood.) The ideology of the child-centered mother is hard to reconcile with the reality of a mother who works full-time. (For example, Galinsky and Shinn [1990] found that 68% of Atlanta mothers in the parent component of the National Child Care Staffing Study thought they should work less and spend more time with their children; 25% of the sample felt that it would be better for the children not to be in child care at all.) They may feel trapped between two irreconcilable demands, or they may feel resolved about the choices they have made. But most appear to feel of two minds, shifting from one to another.

Lower-income women, who work out of absolute economic necessity, tend to accept the situation because they do not have a choice. Guilt in women who have an economic choice is the outcome of the clash between one identity as a career woman taking advantage of work opportunities and a parallel identity as supermom, socialized as traditional wife and mother.[13]

Economist Barbara Bergmann (1986) argues that some women exaggerate their need to work so as to overcome the stigma of using child care and alleviate their guilt:

> A woman's allusion to her family's "need" for the money neatly fends off such accusations (and self-accusations) of callousness and triviality and invites inferences of self-sacrifice on her part.
>
> For some women, the invocation of the "need" for the money also serves to draw attention away from other benefits . . . that some might consider illicit when enjoyed by women . . .the company of other adults, . . . prestige, . . . a sense of independence, . . . outlet for talents and aggressiveness . . . . In sum, focusing on "need" serves to squelch accusations that she is not a true woman.
>
> (p. 32)

Do many mothers feel additional guilt when they enjoy their jobs, perhaps secretly or even unconsciously? Are they glad they don't have to stay home with their young children all the time? They may or may not recognize that through their work they have gained increased self-esteem, social recognition and respect, and financial independence — all good for their children as well as themselves. But, in doing so, have they also left their children behind in unsatisfactory situations? And in some way, are they also leaving behind the caregivers in traditional women's work?

Ironically, mothers who stay at home with their young children often feel guilt that they are not fulfilling their potential. They may wonder if the extra income they could bring to the family if they worked would offset the advantage of their being at home. It's hard to be a mother at this time in U. S. cultural and economic history. Few mothers today feel content in their choices, regardless of the nature of the choice.

Mothers who stay at home with their young children share a

great deal with family child care providers, child care center staff, and others who have chosen to stay with children in this underpaid profession. But family child care providers, as will be seen in Part 4, have found a way to merge the potentially conflicting desires and need to both work *and* stay home with their children.

Fear. Especially in the last few years, parents have become frightened about harm that might come to their children in child care. Sensationalized media coverage of sexual abuse and drugged babies locked in closets has played into the guilt and anxiety that parents already feel. People who believe that mothers belong at home promote these stories as proof. While children are probably statistically safer in child care than they are in their own homes, the vulnerability of very young children is real and we need to develop more effective ways to prevent their abuse in all settings.

Loss. Loss and sorrow are felt to various degrees by many mothers when they *leave* their children in the care of another, especially a stranger. It comes through in their voices when they speak of feelings about giving their children up to someone else for the better part of the child's time. A search for the word "leave" in the focus group transcripts paints a poignant picture of the loss some mothers feel.

Occasionally the sense of loss is so severe that it becomes real grief. Even when they have no choice but to work, or feel sure that they have made the right decision to work, many mothers feel sorrow over missing a good part of their children's childhoods. Left unresolved, will this grief continue to haunt them for years to come?

Jealousy and Competition. Mothers are often ambivalent about the intimacy that develops between their children and the caregivers. They want their surrogate to love and even adore their

children, but they are less sure about the children loving the caregiver in return. Sometimes they consciously or unconsciously resent "the other woman" who gets to be with their children. While one part of them may wholeheartedly support their children's close bonds with their caregivers, another part feels wounded, jealous, or insecure when this happens.

> One mother, on seeing the caregiver lift up her child at a public event, said "I was jealous. It's something like a man and his wife and his mistress all being in the same room together."
>
> (Zinsser, 1987, pp. 76-77)

Mothers in Zinsser's study, *Over a Barrel: Working Mothers Talk About Child Care*, struggled to maintain the sense that they were irreplaceable in their children's lives — as our culture tells them they must be if they are doing their duty. Sometimes envy appeared to cause these mothers to criticize the caregivers and distance themselves from them.

This finding was corroborated by the focus group mothers — and is probably one of the major myths that we must transform. In fact, the opposite is true — the more a child learns to love and care for others, the more she will learn how to identify with and take care of others, including parents, children, other family members, as well as being a good citizen and contributing to the social good.

Jeopardized Attachment. Child development researchers describe the fragile attachment process of mothers and sometimes fathers as they learn how to be with their babies during the first few months of life. Pediatrician Berry Brazelton observes that mothers who anticipate having to put their newborn babies in full-time child care sometimes experience a detachment of their feelings akin to mourning. Sometimes they may begin distancing themselves from this baby, whom they will soon have to leave, before the end

of their pregnancies (Personal communication, February, 1986). In the mothers' stories of loss, is attachment jeopardized? This phenomenon is not healthy for either mother or child, and is likely to affect the quality of their relationship for years to come. Brazelton advocates paid maternity leave of at least four months for exactly this reason.

Brazelton's observation suggests that parents can become unnaturally alienated from parenting when they have to turn child care over to others before establishing a solid relationship. (Is this the same phenomenon that occurs in fathers when they leave the "kid stuff" to their wives?) What toll does such alienation take from the children, the quality of family life, and parents' personal sense of responsibility and generativity?

Denial and Cognitive Dissonance. In several studies using superficial methodology, parents profess to be satisfied with their child care. To provide rational explanations to their friends and relatives — and themselves — they develop "press release" sound bites about how they feel about their child care situation.[14] Yet when researchers explore in greater depth, they usually find signs of dissatisfaction. High satisfaction ratings may be inflated by people's tendency to adapt to the situations they find themselves in and to report satisfaction if they are not actively trying to change the situation. Once nervous parents enroll their child in a program and it proves to be OK, they may recommend it heartily to their friends, reassuring themselves at the same time.

As they attempt to rationalize the decisions they have made, while struggling with all these difficult feelings, cognitive dissonance may creep in. Do mothers who choose to work rationalize by telling themselves that it takes little skill to "baby-sit"? As a mother protects herself from thinking about what her

young child is doing all day, does she become invested in believing that he or she is not doing anything important? If so, she isn't missing anything important. Is that one reason why many parents are at a loss when asked what they think their children do all day in child care? How do such dynamics work against efforts to improve child care?[15]

Making the Most of Child Care

Getting Used to It. What happens to mothers who struggle with negative and difficult emotions, gradually getting used to the image of their children in child care and themselves as child care consumers? Is it far fetched to wonder if years of less-than-satisfactory child care undermines not only the mother's assessment of her own worth as a person but also the lomg-term relationship between parents and their children? How do such experiences affect the life of a family over time? We have yet to assess the degree to which mothers' doubt and remorse that they failed in their maternal duty may linger for the rest of their lives. We have no understanding of the long-term effects of child care — not only on children — but also on parents and family relationships.

Contentment, A Variation on the Theme of Stress. The focus groups offered frequent examples of the cult of idealized motherhood in conflict with today's overworked women, but not in every case. Some mothers had found good child care and resolved their own sense of themselves as both mothers and workers. Galinsky & Hughes (1988) and others have noted that mothers who believe that it is fine to work when their children are in beneficial child care arrangements are happy themselves and tend to have happy children.

The overall picture of research findings seems to suggest that good child care is good for children, or at least that it is good in some ways and not harmful in others. Mothers, fathers, and grandparents of children who are in good child care probably worry unnecessarily.

The Problem of Poor Quality. Unfortunately, research findings also suggest quite clearly that most child care is mediocre at best.[16] It is likely to be custodial in nature, protecting children from harm and meeting their basic physical needs. It does not usually capitalize on the potential to help children develop fully. Thus it also misses the opportunity to contribute more positively to families, present and future, and society at large.

Where ARE the Fathers?

Most fathers do not seem to feel guilty about abandoning their children, or anxious about what might happen to them, or jealous that the caregivers get to be with their children. In our culture, fathers, in addition to leaving the work of arranging and maintaining care to their wives, usually leave them the worry as well. If fathers understood how essentially their children are shaped by their early years — and thereby influenced by the quality of the substantial portion of these years and hours they spend in child care — some would undoubtedly get more involved in the search and ongoing maintenance necessary to ensure their children's well-being.

PART 4. THE CAREGIVERS' PERSPECTIVE

In another study I interviewed diverse family child care providers, child care center teachers, and program directors in four communities across the country.[17] The caregivers were nominated by parents and early childhood community leaders as "'good' in the broadest sense of the word — the kind of people we would like to keep in the field." Although understanding child care worklife was the central goal of the study, the analysis of themes and variations in the caregivers' conversations revealed a great deal of information about the "other side" of the parent-provider partnership.

The troubled feelings that many providers and teachers harbored toward the parents of children in their care were alarming. While some caregivers enjoyed mutually empathic and caring relationships with parents, most seemed to feel that they lived in a separate world. The study concluded that caregivers and parents lived in two "worlds apart."[18] Their separate and discontinuous experiences prevented them from working together in the best interest of the children, as well as adding unneeded stress to the lives of both the parents and caregivers.

When combined with the troubling findings from the parent focus groups, the alarm is amplified. This section of the paper reviews the findings from *Child Care as an Occupation* in light of the parent focus group observations and interpretations.

The Satisfactions of Working With Young Children

The stories of the caregivers' worklives are filled with genuine satisfactions. In centers and homes across the United States,

providers and teachers from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds genuinely cared about children, often loved them, and enjoyed being with them. They gained deep reward from helping them grow and learn. Most saw their jobs as challenging, important, creative work — work that matters.

And yet, most of these same caregivers reported that they would soon be looking for another job. Several independently mentioned that they did not feel they had "real jobs." The consistently low pay, lack of benefits, and lack of opportunity for career advancement were the primary reasons. But other problematic aspects of child care as work influenced how willingly they tolerated the pay inequity. A majority were disappointed in the parent consumers of their labors, for a variety of reasons.

Complaints About Parents

Complaints about parents were frequent and often impassioned. They fell into basic categories of taking advantage and failing to respect the providers' work. And a surprising number questioned mothers' basic decisions about child care.

Taking Advantage. Most of the caregivers in the child care study felt that parents, at least on occasion, take advantage of them. Small daily examples of pet peeves of caregivers in centers and homes alike include when parents:

- bring sick children to care or do not come when called to pick up a sick child;
- chronically pick up their children after closing time;
- do not pay their fees on time or bounce checks;
- forget to bring spare clothes, formula, or diapers;
- do not send their children dressed adequately to play outside; and
- do not inform caregivers when something important is

happening in a child's life.

At Least They Could Pay Their Respect. Behind the small daily gripes, caregivers may perceive a general lack of respect. Perhaps surprisingly, this feeling does not originate in the low compensation. Most caregivers in this study did not think parents should pay more for child care because they believed they could not afford to, but, as one teacher said, "at least they could pay their respect."

It is extremely important for caregivers to feel appreciated by the parents in their programs. Recognition by parents is a major predictor of job satisfaction in child care workers, which ameliorates their potential dissatisfactions. In Nelson's study, words of gratitude and recognition were treasured as much as bonuses and gifts.[19] When parents appreciated them, the teachers and providers in the *Child Care as an Occupation* study became more willing to put up with disrespect from friends and family, as well as low wages (at least for the near future).

Several caregivers I interviewed wanted their role with parents to be that of colleague and/or friend as well as child care provider. Joffe(1977)[20] questions whether such personalized activities undermine the professionalism that early educators seek to establish. She also hints that parents and teachers feel jealousy toward each other and competition for power, which suggests a possible motive for parents to devalue teachers and vice versa.

Nelson tells of one provider who "reported angrily that when she chided a mother for not picking up her child on time, the mother responded, 'I didn't realize you had anything else to do.'"[21]

Caregivers understand that mothers, in their hurried lives, may

simply forget to mention that a traumatic event happened to the child over the weekend. They understand that it was because the parents were so rushed when they left home that they did not make sure they had: mittens, scarf, hat, snow pants, *and* boots. They understand, but they do not forgive. Caregivers may believe that mothers who don't have the patience to "be good with young children" are better off using child care. They may on the one hand support these mothers for their choices — and they may disrespect them at the same time.

Mothers Should Stay Home With Their Babies. Many high-quality caregivers believe that very young children, especially babies, get short shrift in child care.[22] This adds to their belief that mothers should stay home with their babies if they can. They are aware on some level that the quality of most child care is not what it could and should be. While parents may feel that it is satisfactory to leave a child in a program that offers only custodial care, good caregivers understand how much more children need in order to thrive.

Several caregivers complained about how parents enroll their children in child care without knowing what they are choosing.[23] They resent parents for not working harder to find the best care they can find for their children.

Mother "Bashing." I have been in many gatherings of center teachers and providers where mothers were generally derided.[24] This sentiment is expressed so often, by such different types of child care workers, that I believe it is widespread.

Good caregivers who are also mothers (the great majority) often believe *they* give a higher priority to their own children's needs when making career decisions than do most mothers. For example, the most common reason family child care providers give for

choosing their work is "To be home with my own children." Judging from their choices, many of the caregivers in the occupations study were indeed unusually child-centered people. The cult of motherhood survives among child care workers.

Another common attitude among caregivers is a logical extension of the feeling that parents should be more involved in their children's care: "At least, if you are going to *leave* your child, you should care about the details of his/her daily life." Good caregivers appreciate parents who stay for a few minutes in the morning or afternoon to get to know the children's friends and caregiver(s), to hear details of the child's day, to watch what he or she does in this environment.

Let me add that, unfortunately, many less good teachers and providers do not want to be bothered with parents. They are glad parents want to drop off and pick up their children as quickly as possible. But they still criticize the mothers and may take pleasure from feeling that they are rescuing the children.

Cultural Bias. Caregivers are less aware of the degree to which their judgments of parents are classist, racist, or ethnocentric. Kontos and Well (1986) found that both black and white caregivers are more supportive of white parents, as well as educated and married parents. The currently accepted ideology of early childhood professionals supports middle-class parenting styles. How can we reconcile the professed desire to offer culturally sensitive programs with providers' conflicting values? and what do we really mean by "parental choice"? For example, what is the relative importance of the individual vs. the group. What about manners? What is the proper role for children in a group of adults? Most child care programs do not ask parents about their desires on such issues.

Low Expectations for Fathers. The caregivers did not complain about fathers as they did about mothers. They did not expect fathers to be involved in the nuances of child care. Most caregivers, like parents, have accepted the cultural norm that child care is basically the mother's responsibility and that she has to pay for child care "out of *her* paycheck."

Providers' Accommodations

Most of the caregivers seemed to gain satisfaction from taking care of children. Of course they do — this is the only significant reward of their work. But when their satisfaction is gained at the expense of their respect for the mothers of those children, the satisfaction is not in the best interest of all concerned. The caregiver's version of cognitive dissonance is: "Even though all these mothers go off to jobs that are better-paid and more respected than mine is, *I* care about little children. I make a difference in their lives." When they feel that mothers have abandoned *their* responsibility, caregivers may gain additional pleasure at the mothers' expense.

Passive Acceptance and Denigration. Most caregivers understand that their work is underpaid[25], but they believe that neither parents nor the government can afford to pay more. They are vulnerable to the disruption caused when a fellow teacher quits and a less-skillful replacement is hired — or a teacher's position is cut, possibly in violation of licensing standards. But they see the constant turnover as a given. They take for granted that they have to skimp on materials and equipment. Child care is underfunded — we all know that.

They also take for granted that most parents do not appreciate the specialized knowledge required to meet the complex and varied

needs of a group of young children. The public at large does not appreciate the extensive development that is achieved every day by very young children.

Sometimes caregivers share in the cultural devaluation of their work. The Vermont family child care providers interviewed by Margaret Nelson devalued the skill involved in caring for young children. They saw themselves as natural mothers, not skilled teachers. One said "I think that anyone that has taken care of kids for as long as I have, sisters and brothers and all the kids I've taken care of, can do this work." They scorned the idea that formal training is necessary, while minimizing their own experiential knowledge or special temperaments. Nelson recognized that

> Providers buy into the cultural denigration that comes from the fact that these tasks are passed from one woman to another. And although some recognize that they have acquired expertise, others refuse to acknowledge that what they have is anything of value: "Teaching takes skills. But this? I don't know. Instinct is more what you need and a lot of patience."
>
> Given this self-denigration they have difficulty thinking that they should be richly rewarded. (Nelson, 1990, p. 90)

The sense of worthlessness and passivity felt by most of my interviewees was expressed in a wide range of examples. For instance, one teacher said she and two other teachers at her center had discussed the possibility of unionizing, "but no union ever approached us." These workers have condemned themselves to swallow their dissatisfactions. Why did they not approach a union?

Do resentful caregivers turn their unfocused, unexpressed frustrations inward against themselves, feeling a decreased sense of self-worth? In my sample, even those who were incensed about society's negative image of their work, seemed not to have thought

about how feelings of low status affected them. But it is revealed in statements such as one teachers' describing her reluctance to take her first child care job: "I never heard people say very much about day care workers. . . ." Often they were filled with gratitude that I wanted to tell their stories. But why weren't they telling their own stories?

Lack of Action. Many teachers and providers understand the problems of child care quite well, but few *do* anything about them. In the interview transcripts there were only the vaguest hints of anybody speaking up or taking action to call attention to the problems identified, let alone pursuing solutions.[26]

Part of the explanation is that many of the women who choose to take care of young children tend to put other people's needs ahead of their own.[27] They accept their own devaluation with passivity and sometimes a bit of martyrdom. They don't like to rock boats. As one public school principal said about "his" before- and after-school child care workers (whose pay was well below the school district's standard pay scale): "They are not aggressive individuals."

Many of the caregivers assumed quite traditional roles in relation to their own families. This is especially common among family child care providers, who often choose this work because it allows them to be at home, not only for their own children but also for their husbands, other family members, and themselves. Many readily admit to liking the label "homebodies."

Fearing confrontation, the caregivers in this study did not speak up for what they need and deserve. Like their peers across the country, they are most likely to continue in their jobs for a few more months or years, and then to leave the field. All the while, their voices will remain silent on the subject of their

dissatisfactions.

The Culture of Silence. It is more difficult to understand why the unusually dedicated caregivers in the occupations study did not speak up for the *children* they believed to be so worthy. It seems that they understood on some level that child care services are far from ideal — and thus that the children are being shortchanged. Some interviewees passionately decried the travesty in our nation that child care does not receive more support. Were they irresponsible in remaining inactive in the face of such beliefs?

These individuals were not lazy, or scared of being perceived as different. And yet they remain silent. Why? I asked a few of the interviewees why they had not become active in efforts to improve child care. Their response, with a hopeless shrug, was typically "What could be done?"

Paolo Freire, in his analysis of oppressed people in several cultures (1970, 1973) describes their tendency to live in a culture of silence, submerged, as spectators in a reality that is taken for granted.

> Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. . . . As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically "accept" their exploitation. Further, they are apt to react in a passive and alienated manner when confronted with the necessity to struggle for their freedom and self-affirmation. . . .
>
> It is only when the oppressed . . . become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action. . . . It is extremely unlikely that these self-mistrustful, downtrodden, hopeless people will seek their own liberation. (1970, pp. 49-52)

This analysis can be applied to child care workers as well as Third World peasants. Exploitation is evident in their degree of pay inequity, the lack of respect for their work, and, despite their strong dissatisfactions, their passive acceptance of the situation and belief that nothing can be done to improve it. Freire recognizes that the complex forms of oppression in the United States are particularly impersonal, invisible, and dispersed. This makes it more difficult to identify the causes of the problems as well as the potential solutions. Child care workers do fatalistically accept their own exploitation. The prediction that they are unlikely to seek their own liberation reflects the passivity of these workers.[28]

Freire's description of the anger that exploited people may feel toward "the messenger" who describes their oppression further explains child care workers' anger at hearing the information that some parents, employers, and government could pay more for child care. Leaders who try to bring change to such situations are often seen as a threat, particularly by child care workers because they are so invested in being "nice," so reluctant to be critical of others.

Another factor that keeps caregivers from speaking up about the lack of quality in child care is that they do not want to scare vulnerable parents who must depend upon it. Child care has already suffered from an unduly poor reputation, thanks in part to the sensationalist media. Caregivers do not recognize that they are being short-sighted, irresponsible, or unprofessional in remaining silent about their concerns for the field.

The relative failure of the child care union movement is explained by child care workers' extreme avoidance of conflict, especially with the parents in their programs. Even bringing workers together in critical dialogue is proving to be an extremely

difficult first step.

The low status of child care as work is so deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. culture that it is nearly invisible. As child care workers passively accept their low pay and low status — and sometimes even defend this position[29] — they show they have internalized society's low opinion of their work and turned it against themselves. This explains some of the hopelessness.

Mothers too are oppressed by the conditions of their lives, and have little time or energy to deal with their concerns. Feeling powerless, they do not expect powerful decision-makers to care about their needs. Instead of taking action to rectify the problems, they passively and fatalistically try to ignore them, doing the best they can. They may resist critical dialogue for fear that it will shake the already-weak defenses upon which their lives depend, as described earlier in this chapter.

Us and Them

Caregivers' complaints about parents fostered an "us and them" quality that contributes to and reproduces the two separate worlds of mothers and caregivers. There is a great deal of blame in the caregivers' stories. The early childhood profession as a whole, as well as parents, have not addressed the problematic parent-caregiver relationship. We pay lip service to building the partnership, but tacitly support the intolerance.

PART 5. A CHILD CARE SYSTEM IN CRISIS

Child care in this nation shortchanges the children who spend long dreary hours of their formative years in child care that is less than adequate. In the United States, government at all levels contributes much less to support the quality of care or to help families pay for this expensive, labor-intensive service than do governments in other developed nations. Although caregivers enjoy their work, they leave it because of its low income and social status. The occupation is so troubled that many of its workers do not even consider it a "real job." Most parents do not have a real choice among alternatives because so much child care is mediocre and most good child care is expensive.

Why are we raising our children like this? Why haven't child care workers and parents joined together to change this appalling situation? Although some answers are already clear, they do not seem sufficient to explain the situation. At a fundamental level it is hard to understand why so little has been done to address these problems.

The Distant Lifeworlds of Mothers and Caregivers

Because mothers and caregivers live in worlds apart, their needs often conflict.[30] Their perspectives are so different that they do not understand one another, although they are not aware of this problem. Their negative and conflicting feelings extract a toll from themselves, each other, and the children.

When mothers work full-time and take primary responsibility for the children and housework, both their time and their emotional energy are chronically strained. It is alarming to consider

that many mothers and some fathers experience the degree of turmoil over using child care that these studies suggest. What early childhood professionals have interpreted as indifference must be reinterpreted.

Fathers usually do not get involved in the living, breathing, daily life of child care. The realm of women and children at home is essentially devalued in our culture. Many men do not pay much attention to it. They are not aware of what is missing.

Parental involvement in their children's care, perhaps minimized by a lack of appreciation of its importance, may be further reduced by their need to repress their guilt, sadness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. They may want to believe that nothing happens in child care, so it is not important.

In fact, mothers and caregivers are both caught up in untenable positions. The best interest of the child demands that they have an effective working partnership, yet their relationship is undermined by their conflicts. We have only begun to explore the interwoven layers of dependency, camaraderie, jealousy, value conflicts, and power struggles, as well as gratitude and love that contribute to the complex relationships between caregivers and mothers. The potential for their political alliance as well as their personal partnerships is undermined by a cultural and economic system which pits them against each other.

Is This a Business Relationship or Are We Friends? The ambiguities of relationship norms are a troubling source of tension. Because family child care occurs in a home setting, observes Margaret Nelson, both providers and mothers shift ambivalently between the norms of market exchange and the norms of social exchange.[31] No established guidelines support them in negotiating

their emotionally charged relationships. Additional role confusion is introduced when parents and providers are also friends or relatives. Ambiguity of relationship norms occurs in child care centers as well. Although somewhat more formal and business-like than child care homes, centers also involve women performing this most traditional of women's work, usually in fairly isolated settings.

Judith Rollins (1985) describes the emotionally complex relationships between domestic workers and their employers and the role confusion introduced because domestics perform their employers' work, and thus were perceived as surrogates for, or extensions of them. Similarly, the fact that providers and teachers are perceived as the mothers' surrogates complicates and confuses their relationships.

Lack of Direct Communication. Although they experience different needs and perspectives, neither caregivers nor mothers are direct and assertive with each other. True to their socialization as females, they tip-toe around expressions of their own needs or interests. They avoid conflict. Often they each feel powerless in relation to the other.

While the details are different, the caregivers' and mothers' predicament echoes Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's observation about public school teachers and mothers:

> Their generalized low status makes them perfect targets for each other's abuse, not daring to strike out at the more powerful and controlling groups in this society who are most responsible for their demeaned social and economic position.
>
> (1977, p. 69)

A careful look at the stories of mothers and fathers who use child care, and the providers and teachers who take care of their

children, suggests that all is not well. Until each "side" understands the other and truly want to build a partnership together, children, families, caregivers, and our wider society will be shortchanged.

OVERCOMING ESTRANGEMENT

Mothers and caregivers carry on in their separate life-worlds, each oblivious to the others' pain. Far from establishing unity, they contribute to each other's problems. For example, when caregivers blame mothers, directly or indirectly, for not spending more time with their children, they exacerbate the guilt and time pressure that mothers feel. This has a discouraging and alienating effect on mothers, already overloaded with emotional demands. It may cause mothers to resent the caregivers and seek to minimize their interactions in order to avoid further criticism. Of course this behavior in turn adds to the caregivers' resentment.

Similarly, as mothers justify to themselves the importance of the work that draws them away from their children, they simultaneously devalue the work of caring for children. This may cause an unconscious lowering of their esteem of the caregiver. Directly or indirectly this devaluation is likely to be communicated to the caregiver.

Caregivers and mothers vent their frustrations at each other, unaware of their common "over-a-barrel" predicaments (Nelson, 1990; Zinsser, 1987). They may get caught in a downward spiral as a sequence of small injuries gradually develops into deeper resentment. Their partnership, so necessary to the child's well-being, is undermined. As this happens among individual caregivers and parents, it also sets the tone for their child care programs. They could join together in a coalition to challenge the

wider cultural and political system that oppresses them, but the domination of these negative values is reinforced by the lack of time, money, and resources.

> The very people who are desperate for a national policy to deal with their struggles in juggling family and work responsibilities are the least able to become major advocates. They don't have the time or energy. They are struggling to keep their heads above water.
>
> (Barringer, 1992, p.A22)

Mothers and caregivers share the powerlessness of their gender. Fathers, if they understood how their children are being short-changed, might become powerful advocates for social change. We have not begun to reach them with this message. Only when fathers truly value their offsprings' childhood experiences will children get a full measure of support.

The underfunding of child care will not be addressed in the fundamental way necessary to produce the required transformation of cultural and economic values until parents and caregivers join together for their common good. And this will not occur until each group steps back from their resentments to take an empathic look at the other.

FIXING CHILD CARE

While we do not yet understand the degree of harm or lack of harm resulting from different kinds of child care, we certainly know that we are wasting potential. We need to come to peace with the image of ourselves as a nation whose young children often spend half of their formative years in child care. But the child care system, or non-system, in this country is broken. Our nation is getting used to child care that is harmful to our children, their families, and the larger society.

Before a truly satisfactory solution to this major national problem can be accomplished, we will have to make child care good enough so that it is *good* for children and families. Then it will contribute "value added to" rather than subtracted from a family. Instead of child care occurring as a commodity to be purchased as a service like fast food or a car muffler, we must re-conceive child care as an enhancement to the lives of children and families.

To mobilize sufficient national will to carry out these changes, we will first need to make a major national paradigm shift in the value we place on this most traditional of all women's work. Furthermore, we must come to appreciate the formative value of the day-in-and-day-out experiences of very young children. Then, as we examine and refigure the worth of good child care and good caregivers we must significantly bolster the financial investment to create a comprehensive child care system that meets its full potential.[32]

THE NEED FOR PARENT EDUCATION AND CONSUMER AWARENESS

It is probably true that the average family puts more energy into buying a car than they do into choosing a child care arrangement. They think about the features they want in a car and shop around, searching for the best combination of price and value.

Parents Lack of Knowledge About Child Development. Good child care is good for children. Bad child care is bad for children. Parents need to learn more about how to differentiate the two. Parents and early childhood professionals agree upon young children's need for loving nurturance, individual attention, safe and healthy environments, and perhaps the need to play and explore. Clearly parents also want their preschoolers to enter school

"ready to learn," but few seemed aware of all the different kinds of competencies a child needs to succeed in school. Child developmentalists and early childhood educators argue that young children need more than safe, loving care to reach their full potential.[33] There is an information gap in parents' understanding of what young children need to thrive, and indeed in the valuing of a young child's daily life as early experience, reflected by the mother who said her child care program was "pretty much up to par."

Child care is what economists call a "merit good." Parents get more than they know or pay for from good child care. Consumer education and public education are needed to help parents recognize and demand high quality.

Mothers' Intuitions. At the same time, many mothers in my experience know intuitively what would be good for their children and what would not. As they discuss their reactions to different caregivers and environments, they are often sophisticated in their intuitions. Even when they do not have ready language to describe their assessments, they usually identify criticisms or appreciations that are in fact well-grounded in child development and early education theory: "The teachers were a bunch of cold fish." "Imagining being a child, I wouldn't want to spend the day there myself." "The kids looked kind of bored." "I didn't like her own children." They need to be encouraged to pay attention to their intuition.

In countries where the child care system is genuinely supported by government and citizens alike, such as Sweden, Denmark, France, Israel, and the former Soviet Bloc nations, mothers go off to work confident that their children are content and well-cared for. In some cultures, large extended families or the village as a whole shares in child rearing. Mothers in those situations are less likely to feel inadequate when they see their children dependent upon and attached to other adults. No construct of the child-centered mother has shaped their perceptions.

Consumer education can also help mothers, when they find good child care, to stop feeling guilty and anxious, confident that they have made good decisions.

EVERYONE'S PROBLEM

In the United States, child care is deemed the responsibility of each individual family. When a working mother worries about her child's safety, it's "her problem." When a caregiver can't afford to buy enough toys and equipment, it's "her problem." When a family has to settle for a low-cost program because of their low-wage jobs, it's "their problem." When a child has trouble forming relationships because his early attachment experiences were interrupted by frequent changes in child care, it's "his problem." No other developed nation has done less to invest in child care.[34]

While we do not understand the degree of harm or lack of harm being done by our current child care situation, we certainly are wasting potential. The opportunities lost will effect future employers, taxpayers who pay the expensive price of dealing with the negative consequences, and society at large. We need to come to peace with the image of ourselves as a nation whose children are raised, in part, in child care. But before we can do that, we need to fix the child care system.

NOTES

[1] Kathy Modigliani, *Child Care as an Occupation in a Culture of Indifference*. (Boston: Wheelock College Family Child Care Project, 1993).

[2] The frequency of use of the terms "snatching" and "molestation" must be a tribute to the power of the media — these terms were virtually unknown a couple of decades ago, but they are popular topics of television and print media today. While the incidence of both of these dreadful crimes against children may have increased slightly, the media have overemphasized them and are causing many parents to live in fear.

[3] Modigliani (1993).

[4] Kathy Modigliani, Suzanne Helburn, John Morris, & Mary Culkin, *The Economics of Family Child Care: Final Report*, (Boston: Wheelock College Family Child Care Project, forthcoming).

[5] Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple, eds. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. [Revised edition]. Washinton, DC: The National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997).

[6] Modigliani (1993).

[7] Modigliani (1993).

[8] It should be noted that there were only single and married mothers and married fathers in these focus groups. To the best of our knowledge, there were no grandmothers, gay or lesbian parents, or others in less traditional parenting roles.

[9] See Modigliani (1993) for further discussion of these issues.

[10] Caroline Zinsser, *Over a Barrel: Working Mothers Talk About Child Care.* (New York: The Center for Policy Advocacy Research, 1987.)

[11] A. R. Hochschild with A. Machung. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home.* (New York, NY: Viking , 1989).

[12] Margaret Nelson, *Negotiated Care: The Experience of Family Day Care Providers.* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990).

[13] See especially Hochschild with Machung (1989).

[14] Thanks to George Rosenwald's class on The Clinical Interview at the University of Michigan for this insight.

[15] See Modigliani (1993) for further discussion of these issues.

[16] See especially E. Galinsky, C. Howes, S.Kontos, & M. Shinn, *The Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care.* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1994) and S.W. Helburn, ed. *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers., Technical Report.* (Denver, CO: University of Colorado, 1995).

[17] *Child Care as an Occupation in a Culture of Indifference* (1993). Four communities, sampled in equal numbers, included: south-eastern Michigan, the Atlanta metropolitan area; Boston and near suburbs; and Seattle, Washington and rural vicinity. Interviews were conducted with representative proportions of child care center teachers and directors and family child care providers. The 1-6 hour interviews revolved around one basic question:

I wonder how you came to be working with young children, what you think about your job today, and what you think your future work will be. Start the story wherever it begins for you.

[18] Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot (1977) used this phrase to describe the separate and discontinuous relations [her phrase] between parents and public school teachers.

[19] For typically 50-hour weeks, providers in Nelson's 1990 study earned an average of $7,500 per year, well below Vermont's average wage for women workers. Providers were somewhat more educated than Vermont women on average: 94% had completed high school, half had completed some college, 24% graduated from 4-years of college or had graduate coursework. Like other child care workers across the country, they were accurate in believing that they were underpaid.

[20] In C.E.Joffe's study of cooperative nursery school teachers, *Friendly Intruders: Childcare Professionals and Family Life*. (1977), she observed that teachers feel a lack of status in parents' eyes. Joffe argues that teachers feel ambivalent about positing their own professional judgment over parents' intuitive understanding of a situation. On the one hand, teachers want to be seen by parents as professional educators, respected for their expertise. They want to be recognized for their important contributions to the children's development. On the other hand, they also want to see parents as partners and to defer to the parents' authority over their own children.

[21] Nelson (1990), p. 55.

[22] At the same time, these mothers can't imagine keeping their 3- and 4-year olds out of some kind of preschool arrangement with other children and stimulating activities.

[23] During the late 70's and early 80's, when I directed a pre-school/child care center, it was not uncommon to encounter a prospective parent who did not want to visit our center, as required, before enrolling a child for two or three years of full-time child care. Other prospective parents would make a quick tour, but did not have the curiosity or time to ask many questions.

[24] This dynamic has been observed by other researchers. See especially, Ellen Galinsky, "Parent and Teacher-Caregivers: Sources of Tension, Sources of Support," *Young Children* 43(3), 1988, pp. 4-12; and S. Kontos and W. Well, "Attitudes of Caregivers and the Day Care Experiences of Families," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 1, 1986, pp. 47-67.

[25] Child care is probably the most underpaid occupation in the United States, controlling for years of education and work experience. Foregone wages are greatest among those with higher education degrees. Caregivers with relatively little education are likely to be earning about the same as they would in other "unskilled" jobs. Because this most traditional of women's work is viewed as unskilled, workers with additional education and experience are not paid much more than entry-level workers. (Modigliani, 1993)

[26] See Jim Morin, *Taking Action* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin Early Childhood Association,1989) for further discussion of this issue.

[27] Over years of working in the field, I have observed numerous caregivers who have made a way of life caring for others but do not take care of themselves. To the extent that this reflects low self-esteem, it is not good for children as well as the providers and teachers themselves.

[28] The needed leadership, suggests Freire is problem-posing, or problematizing: to promote dialogue that focuses people's attention on a critical analysis of the problematic reality (1968). No matter how submerged they are in a culture of silence, all people are capable of looking critically at their social reality, perceiving the contradictions within it, and choosing to transform injustice. As they become subjects instead of objects of their situation, argues Freire, they gain a new sense of awareness, dignity, and hope.

[29] One director, when she heard that some parents could pay more for child care, said "Not around here they can't." Her center was sponsored by a private hospital and most of its parents were hospital administrators. It is not unusual for caregivers to argue that parents cannot afford to pay more for child care even as the parents in their programs volunteer to do

so. It is hard to imagine this phenomenon in other sectors of the marketplace.

[30] *Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools* is the title of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's book about these two separate and discontinuous worlds (New York: Basic Books, 1977). Her analysis overlaps with mine at the deepest level of economic inequity and political ideology, although the superficial details are different because public schools are surprisingly different from child care. Sometimes the roles are reversed, with public school teachers sharing characteristics of some child care mothers, and caregivers resembling Lightfoot's disenfranchised mothers. But the level of conflict and tension is similar. "Their generalized low status makes them perfect targets for each other's abuse, not daring to strike out at the more powerful and controlling groups in this society who are most responsible for their demeaned social and economic position." (Lightfoot, p. 69)

[31] Although Nelson's sample consisted of predominantly white and frequently rural Vermonters, most of her findings ring true to my work with providers and parents of varied demographics.

[32] Publications of the National Center for the Early Childhood Workforce document this case. For more information, write to: NCECW, 733 15th St., N.W., Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005.

[33] The Family Child Care Accreditation Project at Wheelock College is exploring these issues with parents, providers, and other experts.

[34] Modigliani (1993)

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